DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 218 961 FL 013 058

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TITLE A Systematic Approach to the Development of Aural Skills for ESL Students.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Foreign Language Education and Technology (1st, Tokyo, Japan, August 18-21, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Auditory Discrimination; *Class Activities; Cultural Context; *English (Second Language); Listening Comprehension; *Listening Skills; Postsecondary Education; Secondary Education; *Second Language Instruction; *Skill Development

ABSTRACT

Auditory Comprehension is a skill which must be developed by second language learners if communicative competence is to be achieved. While most programs treat the rudimentary aspects of listening skills with rather mechanical drills, exercises to develop this skill in more advanced stages are usually not included. However, with the trend toward the development of communicative competence as a major aim of second language programs, the need for more sophisticated listening activities than have previously been used becomes obvious. Analysis of how listening comprehension takes place reveals that the learner/listener goes through an active cognitive process decoding messages. Exercises and activities can be designed to help learners grasp specific information from messages; other activities lead learners to a point where they are capable of understanding globally what they have heard. This paper stresses the practical elements that teachers can use to aid their students in developing aural comprehension. A series of exercises and activities is included which can be undertaken in classroom situations to develop both specific and global listening comprehension. (Author/AMH)

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A Systematic Approach to the Development of Aural Skills for ESL Students

Of the skills necessary when communication takes place, surely listening comprehension must rank among the most important. Indeed, Wilga Rivers in her recent book A Practical Guide to the Teaching of English refers to a 1962 study where an analysis was made of the relative amounts of time devoted to the four language skills in communication activities. There it was estimated that listening accounted for 45% of the time, speaking--30%, reading--16%, and writing a mere 9%.[1] Even in classroom situations where more time might reasonably be devoted to reading and writing, listening comprehension retains a high priority. ESL teachers are undoubtedly aware of the importance the ability to listen must have for their students because in a survey conducted by Mary Ashworth among ESL teachers in Canada,[2] and more recently, adapted by myself for ESL teachers in Essex County, Ontario, teachers acknowledged that most of their class time was devoted to listening and speaking activities.

Textual materials often provide adequate initial exercises in sound discrimination, structure practice, and basic comprehension, but usually offer little to help students develop facility of comprehension in "real" communication situations. In general, ESL teachers must develop individualized listening exercises to help students overcome particular problems of sound discrimination; for example, drills using the "th" sound for most ESL learners, b/v for Spanish speakers, l/r for Japanese, final "s" for South East Asians, and so on. ESL teachers with students who hope to attend English-speaking universities or colleges must prepare exercises that will help the students to understand and take notes on lectures. ESL teachers who are preparing students to work in various English-speaking countries must familiarize their students with the type of dialect of

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English they will hear in their new workplace. These are just some examples of the extremely varied aspects of listening comprehension that teachers may have to deal with in their classes. It is unlikely that any one textbook will provide all the listening exercises that may be required, and so it is up to the teachers to compensate for this by developing sequential and relevant listening activities which will lead to a high level of comprehension.

In order to be most effective in this endeavour, teachers must understand the process of listening and be aware of elements which may impede comprehension or auding. It is now customary to refer to listening not as a passive skill but as a receptive skill entailing a cognitive process. In order to decode a message, the listener must possess an awareness of sound patterns, especially of phonemic distinctions, syntactic patterns, basic lexical content, word grouping, and be sensitive to implications of pitch and intonation. In addition, an appreciation of levels of discourse which may include emotional and cultural overtones may be necessary to enable the listener to grasp the full implication of the message. Finally, regional and dialectal variations exhibited by the speaker may further complicate the auding process. Students may have a general grasp of all or most of the above items and yet still fail to be able to relate or explain what they have heard. It is not uncommon for a student to declare that he has understood every word he has heard while listening and yet has retained virtually nothing afterwards. Retention of information from memory will develop only as the student learns to select pertinent pieces of information. He then must reconstruct a logical message from the bits of information he has selected.

Part of the problem that a second language learner may experience in selecting appropriate pieces of an oral message stems from the fact that he is simply not familiar enough nor secure enough in the language to make use of

guessing, logical expectations or approximations of what is being conveyed. He is not aware of the many redundancies of oral language which help a native speaker to grasp the gist of a message. Consequently, the tendency will be to try to assimilate every word in the message with the result that there will be far too much to retain and the important points will be lost in the mass of words. One might compare this phenomenon to oral reading where the reader, concentrating on minute details of delivery, pronunciation, proper intonation, and the like may have little idea of the actual thoughts being expressed. Hence, the listener, like the oral reader trying to deal with each individual word, will fail to concentrate on key words and phrase groups, and will have difficulty in reconstructing the logical message.

There are several ways teachers can help students to make use of redundant aspects of language, to make intelligent guesses about ideas conveyed, and to listen for key words only. To begin with, before playing a listening passage, teachers can provide the class with an outline of the key points in the passage or with questions on it. While the passage is played, students listen for the answers to the questions.

To assist students in making intelligent guesses as to what will be said, teachers might consider taping short conversational exchanges omitting a key word or phrase. Students are to provide a logical conclusion. The following exchange could serve as an example:

A: Do you recommend this restaurant?

B: Oh yes, it has_____

Students supply "excellent food," "a pleasant atmosphere," "reasonable prices," etc. Dr. Rivers in A Practical Guide to the Teaching of English suggests another approach which would serve the same purpose; namely, games such as

"Keeping tabs on the speaker" or "Correct me"[3] where sentences are read which contain inappropriate words for the context. An example would be a sentence such as "The ship was grazing in the pasture." Students are to pick out the incorrect word and provide the appropriate substitute, in this case sheep for ship.

I have mentioned above that spoken language is redundant and that non-native speakers do not know how to make use of the redundant features when they are listening to help them to retain the message. However, teachers sometimes complicate the process for their students by presenting as listening exercises sentences with too little context or passages that have had the redundant features edited out so that they appear more like written copy. The recorded passages, delivered at a normal speaking rate, are played to the class. But without the pauses and clarifications, it is very difficult for the listener to assimilate the message in one hearing. In order to compensate for this, the teacher can play the taped passage several times and allow students to take notes on it. In addition, as mentioned above, an outline of the passage or questions on it could be distributed before the class listens to the tape so that the students will know what they are to listen for.

The problems students may experience with listening comprehension passages are precisely those which they may encounter with university lectures. Teachers who are preparing ESL students for university or college will have to develop a sequential program to assist students in listening to lectures and in note-taking. Christina Bratt Paulston and Mary Newton Bruder in their chapter "Listening Comprehension" in Teaching English as a Second Language: Techniques and Procedures,[4] provide a practical six-stage program for training students in this skill. Their program includes preparatory activities for note-taking such as lists of symbols and abbreviations, connective words and phrases and their

implications in a formal lecture; definitions of terms which will be used; outlines of the major points to be covered in the lecture--the outline becoming less detailed as the students gain ability in note-taking; questions to focus the students' attention on pertinent points; and, of course, a series of taped lectures which students will follow in the language laboratory. The lectures are varied in topic and increase in length as the program progresses.

Ted Plaister's interesting book, Developing Listening Comprehension for ESL Students[5] provides an entire course on developing understanding of lecture materials. He has invented a South East Asian country, Kochen, and presents a series of lectures on various economic, sociological, geographical and other aspects of this country. Along with each lecture there is a list of vocabulary for dictation, three auding prompts on the lecture where unnecessary words are masked out so that the student while listening to the lecture will focus only on relevant facts; notes on the salient issues of the lecture; a place for the student to make his own notes while he listens to the lecture with no other aids than the preparation of the previous exercises; and a quiz with answers provided so that the student may check to see just how much he has grasped. Intermediate and advanced students could profit from such a program, not only because of the exercises for developing note-taking skills, but also because the lectures themselves contain the type of information and vocabulary students are likely to encounter in secondary school and university courses.

In discussing the elements a listener has to contend with in decoding messages along with the problem of retention of information, we have arrived, perhaps prematurely, at the issue of how to develop global comprehension of extended passages. Let us return to the problem of basic comprehension of a message, elements that may prevent auding, and exercises that teachers may use to help students overcome specific difficulties.

John D. Stammer in his article "Target: The Basics of Listening,"[6] identifies three components in the listening process: hearing, listening, and auding. He defines hearing as non-attentive behaviour. At the hearing stage, a message has no meaning to the listener and is perceived as little more than noise. At the listening stage, the person makes an effort to grasp the message, and may even be concentrating, but really retains nothing he hears, and so cannot be said to have grasped the message. Real understanding occurs only at the auding stage.

Stammer also pinpoints circumstances which may deflect messages before they penetrate to the point where they are actually understood. He is referring to problems that children listening to messages in their native language encounter, but his comments are very pertinent for second language learners. For example, he states that auditory fatigue, masking, lack of auditory acuity, or biaural difficulties may prevent a message from even reaching the hearing stage. Certainly second language learners who are not familiar enough with the language to be able to select only highly pertinent facts from a message will soon tire as they try to assimilate every word they hear. Soon they may reach the point where they simply tune out everything and deflect the message entirely. Teachers should anticipate this problem and ensure that messages and instructions are given in a short, precise fashion. Listening exercises should not continue over an extended length of time, especially when recorded materials and language laboratories are the medium for the exercises--that much recorded language is simply too exhausting, especially for young students. Outside noise caused, for example, by other students talking may result in a message being totally deflected or masked. Students, particularly if they begin second language studies in their teen years or later, may not possess the auditory acuity even to distinguish individual words. To assist students with this problem, teachers may wish to play recordings of statements in various languages or minimal pairs. for example,

English man/German Mann, and instruct students to indicate when they hear something in English. If students are incapable of doing even this type of exercise, teachers may wish to check that no physical hearing impairment exists.

At the hearing stage, the sounds are penetrating, but the student hears essentially noise or nonsense. There may be several reasons why the message is not penetrating further to the listening and auding stages. The delivery may be so poor or dull as to make no impression whatsoever on the listener. The student may not gra.p the context in which the message is delivered, and thus it is rendered meaningless. In addition, students may be poor in auditory discrimination, especially of sounds which do not exist in their native language, or may lack concentration skills. Many listening exercises designed to train students to identify specific pieces of information will help to overcome problems at this level. Sound discrimination drills which zero in on the sounds which give the listener difficulties such as exercises involving combinations of short vowels, eg. in pin/ pan/ pen; or short and long vowels, eg. live/ leave; or consonant pairs such as b/v: level/label or l/r: lock/rock, should help the student to improve auditory discrimination. These exercises often require students to indicate whether pairs of sentences they hear are the same or different, or whether certain words belong in one or the other category (containing, e.g. words with long vowel, /i/ or with a short vowel, /I/. Other exercises may incorporate visuals and require students to indicate whether or not a statement describes what is in the picture. Alternately, they may have to associate a statement heard with a picture; e.g. statement one refers to picture C, etc. At a more advanced stage, students could be given a list of word pairs, e.g. country-countries; level-label; situation-situated, etc.; while listening to an extended passage, they circle which word of each pair they heard.[7] Exercises involving grammatical categories are often used to develop sound discrimination (along with grammatical practice). Students may have to indicate whether it is

in the present, past or immediate future. Another exercise may concentrate on negative or affirmative sentences; e.g., upon hearing a sentence such as "We haven't read the chapter," the students are to indicate whether it is affirmative or negative.

Other listening exercises designed for the isolation of discrete pieces of information may help to develop the students' skills of concentration and to keep them attentive. Physical response exercises offer one example. Included might be "Simon says" games, and carrying out classroom commands; e.g. sit up straight, raise your right hand, close your books, etc., both for younger students. The teacher may make a statement such as "You have a headache," and the students mime the action by holding their head in their hands and miming an expression of pain. Students may also be required to carry out longer instructions; for example, "Collect the books from rows three and four and put them on the second shelf of the bookcase at the back." The teacher may distribute the floor plan of a house and then indicate where various pieces of furniture are to be places; the students draw in the furniture at their desks and compare their drawings later. A useful exercise based on oral commands involves city maps. Students find a common starting point, e.g., city hall, and then follow a series of directions to arrive at a certain destination.

Exercises involving numbers are very good in the development of concentration skills, and in addition, give students practice with highly relevant information. It is often essential for people to understand and retain telephone numbers, addresses, prices, times (of arrival, departure, performances, etc.), and many other facts which contain numbers. Students usually enjoy games involving numbers and become quite adept at them. To check whether young students can grasp numbers rapidly out of sequence, teachers may devise "join the dot" games where the numbers are chosen from a given range, say 101 to 199, and appear in random order. Scrambled alphabet letters can also be used in dot games. Students can listen to

pairs of numbers and indicate rapidly which number is larger. For number exercises involving game scores, temperatures, dates, distances between cities, telephone numbers, simulated reports of arrival and departure times in train stations and airports, teachers should provide an answer sheet with spaces left blank beside the city, team, or person's name, etc. where the student will fill in the appropriate number(s) when they hear them. Certain such exercises can be taped from actual weather or sports broadcasts and be used for "authentic" listening experiences in the classroom. However, if teachers try these exercises themselves, they will find that the delivery of scores, temperatures, and so on is usually extremely rapid, and even a native speaker would need to hear the broadcast several times in order to record even the numbers given. For this reason, teachers will probably want to record personally several "leisurely" versions of such programs for students to practise with before exposing them to the frustration of trying to extract specific numerical facts from an "authentic" program. Even when students are ready to hear real broadcasts, they should still be told in advance what to listen for, or have their prepared answer sheets (with appropriate blanks to be filled) and if the teacher has taped the broadcast, s/he should allow the students to hear it several times.

It should be remembered that one of the main elements which impedes listening comprehension may be that the message is of no real interest to the listener. Especially when dealing with younger students, teachers should try to provide materials that the students find interesting. If the teacher knows, for example, that a number of the students are very interested in hockey or soccer, or some other sport, this knowledge can be used as motivating factors by devising exercises which incorporate actual scores of the major teams or the times when a player scored, which players scored, and so on.

Some students who concentrate on what they hear, and who are capable of extracting specific facts from messages if they are told to do so, nevertheless are incapable of drawing conclusions from a message they hear, or of grasping an entire integrated message. Hence they are listening without full comprehension. Their difficulty may stem from a lack of confidence to select pertinent facts with which to reconstruct the message, and an inability to retain what has been heard.

In the discussion on developing note-taking skills above, I have touched upon some methods teachers might try to remedy these problems for intermediate and advanced students. However, even beginning students should be given opportunities to exhibit general understanding of messages they hear without fear that they must understand every word. This can be accomplished by letting them listen simply for pleasure to simple songs, stories, or skits acted out by their fellows in the new language. Later the class discusses the content in general. Next, students could be trained to give simple résumés of stories they hear by answering the formula questions Who? Where? When? Why?. An exercise which helps students learn to draw conclusions could involve a taped exchange where certain information is given and the student must say where the situation in taking place. For example, after hearing the following exchange, students must decide whether the action takes place in the dining room at home, in a school cafeteria, or in a restaurant:

Mary: This salad is tasteless. Could you pass the salt and pepper please?

Joe: There isn't any on the table but if you go through the line, at the end they have little packages of salt, pepper and salad dressing.

Exercises that require students to listen to a question followed by three or four possible answers, and the student is to choose the most logical response to the question, or inversely, a statement followed by three or four

questions where students are to choose the question which elicited the given response, can develop skills in drawing logical conslusions and improve short-term retention. When students become skilful in giving logical responses to statements and short exchanges, they can listen to longer dialogues and passages, answering multiple choice questions on them which have been handed out before or after the passage is heard. When multiple choice questions are carefully constructed, the correct answer will not actually repeat information from the listening passage, but will be based on items which can be inferred from facts in the passage. Such exercises obviously develop inferencing skills and show students that comprehension of a passage does not necessarily entail word for word retention, but a parallel, often simpler reconstruction of the given facts.

Sometimes, despite highly developed listening skills, ability to retain information, and skill at inferencing, students may fail to understand a message because they have nothing to draw on from their own experience or background which remotely resembles the context of the message. This can happen to native-language listeners, but second-language learners may miss or misconstrue the cultural implications of a message. Various levels of language or dialectal variations may interfere with understanding as well. Students who are learning English as a second language outside an English-speaking country will not have the exposure to various levels of language in an English environment and probably will have the opportunity only to hear standard, formal language in the class. These students especially will need to hear recordings of English speech samples gathered from various English-speaking countries. These problems are usually dealt with at the more advanced level of study where material is less controlled or structured. Teachers can offset problems of cultural understanding somewhat by preteaching vocabulary and expressions likely to cause difficulties, and by discussions on cultural implications of passages. Much exposure to passages con-

taining dialectal variations can help to train students' ears for these deviations from the standard language. To deal with levels of language, teachers chould choose a common topic, for example, refusal of an invitation to a social event, and then devise and record several simulated dialogues on the same topic between, for example, an employee and employer, two fellow workers, a woman and a man, two young people, a child and an older person, a student and a professor, etc. Students note the different ways the same information is conveyed depending on the situation, age, social class, and so on. Later they can develop their own simulations for the rest of the class to listen to.

In this paper, I have tried to define briefly the listening process, outline some of the difficulties which second language learners may experience when trying to comprehend an oral message, and suggest various exercises and activities teachers may use to assist their students to develop good listening skills. Listening comprehension is not something that can be taught at the beginning of a program and then taken for granted as other elements of language are dealt with. Since the ability to listen and comprehend is so central to language classes and to communication in general, it must be taught systematically at every level of the language program.

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Notes

1. Wilga Rivers and Mary S. Temperly, A Practical Guide to the Teaching of English (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 64, hereafter referred to as Rivers, Temperly.

2. Mary Ashworth, Immigrant Children and Canadian Schools (Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1975), pp. 138-140.

3. Rivers, Temperly, "Keeping tabs on the speaker, " pp. 74-5, "Correct me," p. 77.

4. Christina Bratt Paulston and Mary Newton Bruder, Teaching English as a Second Language: Techniques and Procedures (Cambridge, Mass: Winthrop Publishers, Inc., 1976), pp. 145-153, hereafter referred to as Paulston, Bruder.

5. Ted Plaister, Developing Listening Comprehension for ESL Students (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976).

6. John D. Stammer, "Target: The Basics of Listening" in Language Arts. Volume 54, No. 6 (September, 1977), pp. 661-664.

7. Paulston, Bruder, p. 134.

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